

Opening Statement of Marie L. Yovanovitch to the
House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on
Intelligence, Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Committee on
Oversight and Reform

October 11, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to start with this statement today.

For the last 33 years, it has been my great honor to serve the American people as a Foreign Service Officer, over six Administrations—four Republican, and two Democratic. I have served in seven different countries, five of them hardship posts, and was appointed to serve as an ambassador three times—twice by a Republican President, and once by a Democrat. Throughout my career, I have stayed true to the oath that Foreign Service Officers take and observe every day: “that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic;” and “that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same.” Like all foreign service officers with whom I have been privileged to serve, I have understood that oath as a commitment to serve on a strictly nonpartisan basis, to advance the foreign policy determined by the incumbent President, and to work at all times to strengthen our national security and promote our national interests.

My Background

I come by these beliefs honestly and through personal experience. My parents fled Communist and Nazi regimes. Having seen, first hand, the war, poverty and displacement common to totalitarian regimes, they valued the freedom and democracy the U.S. represents. And they raised me to cherish these values as well. Their sacrifices allowed me to attend Princeton University, where I focused my studies on the Soviet Union. Given my upbringing, it has been the honor of a lifetime to help to foster those principles as a career Foreign Service Officer.

From August 2016 until May 2019, I served as the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. Our policy, fully embraced by Democrats and Republicans alike, was to help Ukraine become a stable and independent democratic state, with a market economy integrated into Europe.

Recent Ukrainian History

Ukraine is a sovereign country, whose borders are inviolate and whose people have the right to determine their own destiny. These are the bedrock principles of our policy. Because of Ukraine's geostrategic position bordering Russia on its east, the warm waters of the oil-rich Black Sea to its south, and four NATO allies to its west, it is critical to the security of the United States that Ukraine remain free and democratic and that it continue to resist Russian expansionism.

Russia's purported annexation of Crimea, its invasion of Eastern Ukraine, and its de facto control over the Sea of Azov, make clear Russia's malign intentions towards Ukraine. If we

allow Russia's actions to stand, we will set a precedent that the United States will regret for decades to come.

Supporting Ukraine's integration into Europe and combatting Russia's efforts to destabilize Ukraine have anchored US policy since the Ukrainian people protested on the Maidan in 2014 and demanded to be a part of Europe and live according to the rule of law. That was US policy when I was appointed Ambassador in August 2016, and it was reaffirmed as the policy of the current administration in early 2017.

The Fight Against Corruption

The Revolution of Dignity, and the Ukrainian people's demand to end corruption, forced the new Ukrainian government to take measures to fight the rampant corruption that long permeated that country's political and economic systems. We have long understood that strong anti-corruption efforts must form an essential part of our policy in Ukraine; now there was a window of opportunity to do just that.

Why is this important? Put simply: anti-corruption efforts serve Ukraine's interests. They serve ours as well. Corrupt leaders are inherently less trustworthy, while an honest and accountable Ukrainian leadership makes a U.S.-Ukraine partnership more reliable and more valuable to the U.S. A level playing field in this strategically located country—one with a European landmass exceeded only by Russia and with one of the largest populations in Europe—creates an environment in which U.S. business can more easily trade, invest and profit. Corruption is a security issue as well, because corrupt officials are vulnerable to Moscow. In short, it is in our national security interest to help

Ukraine transform into a country where the rule of law governs and corruption is held in check.

Two Wars

But change takes time, and the aspiration to instill rule-of-law values has still not been fulfilled. Since 2014, Ukraine has been at war, not just with Russia, but within itself, as political and economic forces compete to determine what kind of country Ukraine will become: the same old, oligarch-dominated Ukraine where corruption is not just prevalent, but *is* the system? Or the country that Ukrainians demanded in the Revolution of Dignity—a country where rule of law is the system, corruption is tamed, and people are treated equally and according to the law?

During the 2019 presidential elections, the Ukrainian people answered that question once again. Angered by insufficient progress in the fight against corruption, Ukrainian voters overwhelmingly elected a man who said that ending corruption would be his number one priority. The transition, however, created fear among the political elite, setting the stage for some of the issues I expect we will be discussing today.

Understanding Ukraine’s recent history, including the significant tension between those who seek to transform the country and those who wish to continue profiting from the old ways, is of critical importance to understanding the events you asked me here today to describe. Many of those events—and the false narratives that emerged from them—resulted from an unfortunate alliance between Ukrainians who continue to operate within a corrupt system, and Americans who either did not

understand that corrupt system, or who may have chosen, for their own purposes, to ignore it.

It seems obvious, but bears stating, that when dealing with officials from any country—or those claiming connections to officialdom—one must understand their background, their personal interests, and what they hope to get out of a particular interaction before deciding how to evaluate their description of events or acting on their information.

To be clear, Ukraine is filled with many citizens and officials who want the very things we have always said we want for the United States: a government that acts in the interests of its people; “a government of the people, by the people and for the people.” The overwhelming support for President Zelenskiy in April’s election proved that. And it was one of our most important tasks at the embassy in Kyiv to understand and act upon the difference between those who sought to serve their people and those who sought to serve only themselves.

Addressing Specific Concerns

With that background in mind, I would like to briefly address some of the specific issues raised in the press that I anticipate you may ask me about today.

Events Before and After I served in Ukraine

I arrived in Ukraine on August 22, 2016 and left Ukraine permanently on May 20, 2019. Several of the events with which you may be concerned occurred before I was even in country. Here are just a few:

- the release of the so-called “Black Ledger” and Mr. Manafort’s subsequent resignation from the Trump campaign;
- the Embassy’s April 2016 letter to the Prosecutor General’s Office about the investigation into the Anti-Corruption Action Center or AntAC; and
- the departure from office of former Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin.

Several other events occurred after I was recalled from Ukraine. These include:

- President Trump’s July 25 call with President Zelenskiy;
- All of the discussions surrounding that phone call; and
- Any discussions surrounding the reported delay of security assistance to Ukraine in Summer 2019.

During my Tenure in Ukraine

- As for events *during* my tenure in Ukraine, I want to categorically state that I have never myself or through others, directly or indirectly, *ever* directed, suggested, or in any other way asked for any government or government official in Ukraine (or elsewhere) to refrain from investigating or prosecuting actual corruption. As Mr. Lutsenko, the former Ukrainian Prosecutor General has recently acknowledged, the notion that I created or disseminated a “do not prosecute” list is completely false—a story that Mr. Lutsenko, himself, has since retracted.

- Equally fictitious is the notion that I am disloyal to President Trump. I have heard the allegation in the media that I supposedly told the Embassy team to ignore the President’s orders “since he was going to be impeached.” That allegation is false. I have never said such a thing, to my Embassy colleagues or to anyone else.
- Next, the Obama administration did not ask me to help the Clinton campaign or harm the Trump campaign, nor would I have taken any such steps if they had.
- I have never met Hunter Biden, nor have I had any direct or indirect conversations with him. And although I have met former Vice President Biden several times over the course of our many years in government, neither he nor the previous Administration ever, directly or indirectly, raised the issue of either Burisma or Hunter Biden with me.
- With respect to Mayor Giuliani, I have had only minimal contacts with him—a total of three that I recall. None related to the events at issue. I do not know Mr. Giuliani’s motives for attacking me. But individuals who have been named in the press as contacts of Mr. Giuliani may well have believed that their personal financial ambitions were stymied by our anti-corruption policy in Ukraine.
- Finally, after being asked by the Department in early March to extend my tour until 2020, I was then abruptly told in late April to come back to Washington from Ukraine “on the next plane.” You will understandably want to ask why my posting ended so suddenly. I wanted to learn that too, and I tried to find out. I met with the Deputy Secretary of State,

who informed me of the curtailment of my term. He said that the President had lost confidence in me and no longer wished me to serve as his ambassador. He added that there had been a concerted campaign against me, and that the Department had been under pressure from the President to remove me since the Summer of 2018. He also said that I had done nothing wrong and that this was not like other situations where he had recalled ambassadors for cause. I departed Ukraine for good this past May.

- Although I understand that I served at the pleasure of the President, I was nevertheless incredulous that the U.S. government chose to remove an Ambassador based, as best as I can tell, on unfounded and false claims by people with clearly questionable motives. To make matters worse, all of this occurred during an especially challenging time in bilateral relations with a newly elected Ukrainian president. This was precisely the time when continuity in the Embassy in Ukraine was most needed.

Before I close, I must share the deep disappointment and dismay I have felt as these events have unfolded. I have served this nation honorably for more than 30 years. I have proudly promoted and served American interests as the representative of the American people and six different presidents over the last three decades. Throughout that time, I—like my colleagues at the State Department—have always believed that we enjoyed a sacred trust with our government.

We make a difference every day on issues that matter to the American people—whether it is war and peace, trade and investment, or simply helping with a lost passport. We repeatedly uproot our lives, and we frequently put ourselves in harm’s way to serve this nation. And we do that willingly, because we believe in America and its special role in the world. We also believe that, in return, our government will have our backs and protect us if we come under attack from foreign interests.

That basic understanding no longer holds true. Today, we see the State Department attacked and hollowed out from within. State Department leadership, with Congress, needs to take action now to defend this great institution, and its thousands of loyal and effective employees. We need to rebuild diplomacy as the *first* resort to advance America’s interests and the front line of America’s defense. I fear that not doing so will harm our nation’s interest, perhaps irreparably.

That harm will come not just through the inevitable and continuing resignation and loss of many of this nation’s most loyal and talented public servants. It also will come when those diplomats who soldier on and do their best to represent our nation face partners abroad who question whether the ambassador truly speaks for the President and can be counted upon as a reliable partner. The harm will come when private interests circumvent professional diplomats for their own gain, not the public good. The harm will come when bad actors in countries beyond Ukraine see how easy it is to use fiction and innuendo to manipulate our system. In such circumstances, the only interests that will be served are those of our strategic adversaries, like Russia, that spread chaos and attack the institutions and norms that the U.S.

helped create and which we have benefited from for the last 75 years.

I am proud of my work in Ukraine. The U.S. Embassy, under my leadership, represented and advanced the policies of the United States government as articulated, first by the Obama Administration and then by the Trump Administration. Our efforts were intended, and evidently succeeded, in thwarting corrupt interests in Ukraine, who fought back by selling baseless conspiracy theories to anyone who would listen. Sadly, someone was listening, and our nation is the worse off for that.

Thank you for your attention. I welcome your questions.